

To be published in *The Psychologist*

### **Textbook History and Historical Scholarship**

*A History of Modern Psychology*. Per Saugstad. Cambridge University Press. Hb. £115.

*Our Minds, Our Selves*. Keith Oatley. Princeton University Press. Hb. £24.

Per Saugstad was a Norwegian psychologist who lived from 1920 to 2010. He was a professor of psychology at the University of Oslo from 1967 until his retirement in 1990. His main area of interest was language. This book was originally published in Norwegian in 1998 and a revised edition was published in 2009. The author simultaneously prepared a manuscript in English and it has finally been published due to the efforts of his son, Jens Saugstad, who is a philosophy professor.

I can understand why Norwegians would want a textbook in Norwegian but I am not sure what it adds to the English-language literature. It is indistinguishable from dozens of other textbooks on the history of psychology. Although it is described on the cover as a “global” and “comprehensive” history of psychology, it is similar to other textbooks in that it covers only a few European countries and the United States.

Keith Oatley is a British psychologist who has lived in Canada since 1990. He is professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto. This book is different from other textbooks in that the material is organised around topics rather than psychologists and their theories. Although it is described on the cover as “a brief history of psychology,” much of the book is devoted to recent research.

It is no coincidence that both of these authors wrote their books in retirement. There is a long tradition of psychologists who take an interest in the history of psychology after they retire, presumably because they have become aware of the passage of time. It is also no coincidence that neither is a specialist in the history of psychology. There is also a long tradition of amateur historians of psychology that dates back to Boring (1929) and beyond.

There is a market for this literature because, as surveys in several countries have shown (e.g. Brock & Harvey, 2015), most of the psychologists who teach courses in the history of psychology are not specialists in the area either and they can more easily identify with a textbook that has been written by someone who is in a similar position to themselves. The authors are rarely interested in doing historical research and prefer to present broad overviews of psychology that reflect their approach to the subject and act as a form of propaganda for the field. One of the problems with these broad overviews is that they often contain the same mistakes (Thomas, 2007). This is because they are based mainly on other textbooks rather than historical research. It is also why historians of science like Kuhn (1970) refer to a specific genre of “textbook history” that is different from historical scholarship.

Fortunately, there are alternatives. The textbook by Fancher and Rutherford (2016) has always been a scholarly work. Other textbooks by respected historians of psychology in North America include the books by Pickren and Rutherford (2010) and Walsh, Teo and Baydala (2016). As far as British authors are concerned, there are the textbooks of Richards (2010) and Smith (2013). The latter is an eminent historian of science.

There is no reason why we should not expect the same professional standards in the history of psychology that we take for granted in other areas of psychology. Even if those standards cannot be applied to the psychologists who teach courses in the history of psychology, they can at least be applied to the textbooks that are used.

*Reviewed by Adrian C. Brock who is an honorary research associate at the University of Cape Town.*

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